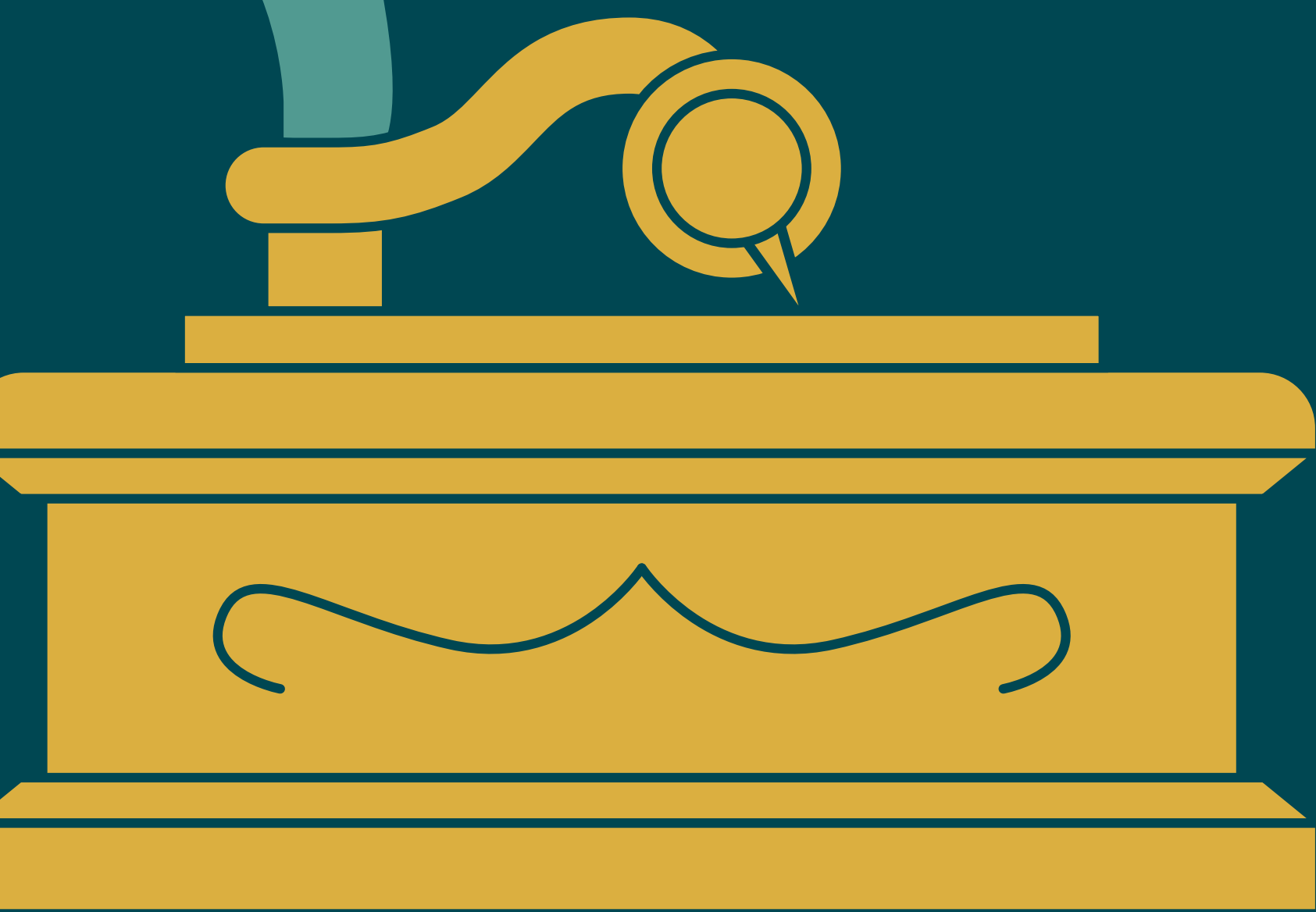


TALKING MACHINES

THE ART OF
CAPTURING SOUND



Talking Machines. The Art of Capturing Sound

The Biblioteca Nacional de España (BNE) houses not only books and manuscripts but also sound recordings that are part of our collective and individual memory. This exhibition invites visitors to relive the amazement aroused by the so-called ‘talking machines’ – the first phonographs and gramophones – that revolutionised the way humans related to sound at the turn of the twentieth century.



Edison Home A phonograph made by Thomas Alva Edison in Orange, New Jersey, 1901, and wax cylinder with its metal case made by Hugens y Acosta, c. 1900.

BNE, CE0246.

These inventions, initially designed for scientific or administrative purposes, soon progressed beyond the initial amazement and became more than just fascinating rarities. Phonographs and gramophones enabled people to record and reproduce voices and music on a device, but not only that: this new technology made it possible to listen to someone who was absent, capturing emotion and intonation on a medium. Public demonstrations given at fairs and exhibitions caused surprise and bewilderment, as listening to a voice without a performer seemed to verge on magic.



Pathé Le Gaulois phonograph in grey-blue with a glass horn made by Compagnie Générale de Phonographes, Cinématographes et Appareils de Précision (Pathé Frères) in Paris, 1901.

ÁUREA DOMÍNGUEZ MORENO COLLECTION.

That amazement soon found a concrete outlet in the inventions of Edison and Berliner. They made it possible to record, preserve and reproduce the human voice and music for the first time in history. Through wax cylinders and shellac discs, sound, the spoken word, popular music and political speeches began to travel and reach the homes of people from all walks of life, democratising access to oral and musical culture.

The exhibition surveys not only mechanical objects but also the voices and music that shaped an era. Since sound is not only content but also a medium, the way we have listened to it has been linked to how we have managed to preserve it. Listening to a recording for the first time caused the same surprise as seeing a photograph, since something that was previously unrepeatable could now be heard as many times as desired.



Spanish Gold Moulded Record, Spanish language course for English speakers, 1905 edition by International Correspondence School in Scranton, Pennsylvania.
BNE, CL/226/4.

Technology at the service of popular culture

The first cylinders and discs captured songs, speeches and fragments of everyday life. Thanks to them, forms of expression such as the copla, zarzuela and flamenco found a new means of dissemination, reaching the homes of people from all walks of life. At first listening to the phonograph was chiefly a public, shared activity that took place at travelling exhibitions and in stores with specialised recording and listening rooms, which were called *gabinetes fonográficos* in Spain. However, more economical models eventually appeared, democratising access to music and the spoken word.

Portable gramophone (trench type), sold and assembled by clockmaker Carlos Coppel in Madrid, c. 1918–29.

BNE, CE2719.





Berliner
gramophone
disc record with
the voice of
Mochuelo singing
Malagueñas,
recorded in Madrid
in August 1899.
BNE, DS/15552/16.

The gramophone, which used disc records instead of cylinders, consolidated this process. It became part of the furniture as well as a desirable object and a symbol of modernity, making it possible to listen to music at home without needing to know how to play an instrument. Manufacturers realised the emotional value of this technology and brought out models for the whole family, including children, that played records of stories or songs.

Over time technical progress brought new possibilities for recording and listening. In the mid-1920s the introduction of the microphone and electric recording made it possible to record nuances and capture whispers. Record labels such as Columbia promoted local production, turning records into historical documents. The idea of portability also gained ground, and compact gramophones that could fit inside carrying cases appeared, freeing sound from the confines of its living-room corner.

LA “GRAMOLA”

será siempre el instrumento preferido, por sus insuperables condiciones musicales - Se advierte que únicamente son aparatos “GRAMOLA” los que ostentan la célebre marca

“LA VOZ DE SU AMO”

Compañía del Gramófono, S. A. E.

Balmes, 56 y 58.-Barcelona

Agentes en todas las capitales y poblaciones importantes de España.



‘The Gramola will always be the preferred instrument’.
Compañía del Gramófono advertisement. *Nuevo mundo*,
7 November 1919, 36.

BNE, ZR/594.

The Biblioteca Nacional as a custodian of sound heritage

The BNE has collected, catalogued, and preserved recordings in various formats for decades, from wax cylinders and shellac discs to vinyl records and digital files. In doing so, it documents both the technological evolution and cultural diversity of Spain. Its shelves contain the voices of famous artists, children's stories, official speeches and music that would otherwise have been lost.

This conservation work includes restoring and digitising fragile materials, an act of responsibility towards the future. The *Talking Machines* exhibition highlights this invisible work, displaying the original devices alongside the sounds they produced, connecting the equipment with the voice. Preserving sound entails caring for the way a society expresses itself, feels emotions, and recognises itself.



Guiniphone portable gramophone made by Guinea Portable Gramophone Co. Ltd. in London, c. 1930.

ÁUREA DOMÍNGUEZ MORENO COLLECTION.

The exhibition argues that preserving these recordings and the machines that brought them to life is a way of safeguarding the sound memory of our culture. Each cylinder, each disc holds a unique trace of the past and its possibility of continuing to be listened to. The Biblioteca Nacional de España, as a public institution, assumes this responsibility for the future, because the history of sound is also part of our cultural biography.



Illustrated sleeve for a shellac record, c. 1930.

BNE, DS/11170/38.



Pathé gramophone model Pathéphone 4 made by the Compagnie Générale de Phonographes, Cinématographes et Appareils de Précision (Pathé Frères) in Paris, c. 1908-12. BNE, CE2632.

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From October 16, 2025 to February 8, 2026
Hipostila Exhibition Room

Paseo de Recoletos, 20-22
28071 Madrid
91 580 78 00 – 91 580 78 03/48
info@bne.es / www.bne.es

Monday to Saturdays, 10:00 to 20:00
Sundays and holidays, 10:00 to 14:00

Free admission until full capacity
BNE guided tours: pre-registration required
Group visits, with or without their own guide, 5 to 10 people:
pre-registration required
Information and registration at: www.bne.es/agenda

Capacity: 36 people
Approximate visit duration: 1 hour
Last admission: 30 minutes before closing

Metro: Line 4, Colón and Serrano stations
Buses: 1, 5, 9, 14, 19, 21, 27, 37, 45, 51, 53, 74, 150
RENFE local trains: Recoletos Station

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